

Digital Witchcraft

JESSE SIMON

With so much attention currently being given to the thorny questions surrounding Artificial Intelligence, it was only a matter of time before the conversation spread to the opera house; and while Marie-Ève Signeyrole's ambitious, accomplished new staging of Verdi's *Macbeth* for the Deutsche Oper Berlin was concerned primarily with transplanting the tragedy into a nightmarish near-future of corporate intrigue, it also offered a critique of the shady algorithms that seem to play an increasing role in modern life. With reliably taut musical direction from Enrique Mazzola and a cast that gained in distinction as the evening progressed, the evening was a rewarding addition to the Deutsche Oper's recent run of intelligent and provocative new Verdi productions.

Ms Signeyrole's staging seemed determined to avail itself of every possible theatrical technology: from the old-fashioned stagecraft of trapdoors and sliding sets to the currently fashionable use of pre-filmed materials and live-video projections, the technical ambitions of the staging were apparent in every scene. Yet what was most impressive was how little the complex technological flourishes drew attention to themselves; while the staging must have been a triumph of logistics for everyone backstage, the impression from the auditorium was of a well-told story with few moments of obvious excess. If live video has become ubiquitous in recent years, there was little sense here that it was being employed simply for the sake of being on the cutting edge.

Indeed, the technical dazzle worked almost wholly in the service of the story. While Ms Signeyrole kept the action firmly in its original location – Macbeth and Banquo even wore kilts in their first appearance – the medieval era was quietly discarded in favour of a near-future (or alternate-present) setting in which Scotland had seceded from the United Kingdom and were fighting for control of oil drilling in the North Sea. The opera's various Thanes were, in fact, a perfect fit for the staging's high-level corporate figures who devoted their lives to fending off foreign interests while manoeuvring for greater political influence at home; and with the brutal murders of Banquo and Macduff's family, the staging suggested that the boundary between modern capitalism and organised crime was both



Signeyrole, *Macbeth* © 2024 by Eike Walkenhorst

Berlin, sábado, 23 de noviembre de 2024. Deutsche Oper Berlin. Verdi: *Macbeth*. Marie-Ève Signeyrole, director. Roman Burdenko (Macbeth), Marko Mimica (Banco), Felicia Moore (Lady Macbeth), Attilio Glaser (Macduff), Nina Solodovnikova (Lady in Waiting), and Thomas Cillufó (Malcolm). Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Enrique Mazzola, conductor

extremely thin and highly permeable.



Verdi: Macbeth. Enrique Mazzola, conductor. Marie-Ève Signeyrole, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, November 2024. © 2024 by Eike Walkenhorst.

Yet the staging's most fascinating element was its narrative frame. Before the music started there was a pre-filmed spoken prologue delivered by a digital apparition – in fact an actress with a sparkly silver cap and a gift for eccentric, slightly inhuman line-readings – who introduced herself as a hyper-advanced neural network capable of monitoring political events and corporate cash-flow all around the world. The same figure appeared on stage as the leader of the witches, a group of identically-dressed women sitting at an orderly array of digital workstations, an elegant visual analogue for the mysterious inner workings of an AI algorithm. (Would a thousand witches working at a thousand iPads eventually write Shakespeare?)

Although the idea never quite achieved the prominence it deserved, the implications remained apparent: all of Macbeth's most crucial decisions – to kill Duncan and seize the throne, to have Banquo put to death, and to wage war against Macduff – were based not on personal instinct, nor even on the urging of Lady Macbeth, but rather on the flawed projections of an algorithm; and it was his faith in AI that led eventually to his downfall.

While Ms Signeyrole was able to update the story into a relevant parable for the present-day not all aspects of the staging were equally successful. The constant presence of a stag-man (a dancer with a large, antlered headpiece) was conceptually ingenious – it underlined Macbeth's slow transformation from hunter to hunted – but not quite as convincing in practice. And the decision to include fairly graphic depictions of the opera's most violent moments – notably Duncan's murder and the slaughter of Macduff's family – veered dangerously close to audience-baiting (and, to be fair, some of the audience rose to the bait, greeting Ms Signeyrole with more than usual hostility at the curtain call). Perhaps a more significant flaw was a failure to delineate the figure of Macduff more carefully in the first two acts: when he showed up again in the fourth act we had almost forgotten who he was. Yet the staging's minor lapses did not ultimately detract from the clarity and intelligence of the story-telling.

Musically the evening took a while to get going; but if the first three acts contained only isolated flashes of brilliance, the fourth saw soloists, choir and orchestra make a sudden and decisive shift into high gear. The opening chorus of 'Patria oppressa' – which featured the Deutsche Oper choir at the height of their considerable powers – set the scene for the opera's lone tenor aria, in which Attilio Glaser's noble phrasing was matched by orchestral playing of immense sensitivity. This was followed by Felicia Moore's impressive sleepwalking scene – easily her finest appearance of the evening – and an electrifying 'Pietà, rispetto, amore' from Roman Burdenko, filled with rage and defiance.

Mr Burdenko had already offered some glimpses of his full might in the previous acts. The duet with Banco in the first scene was suitably spirited, but it was in the aftermath of Duncan's murder – especially the crazed assertions that Macbeth will sleep no more – that

his capacity for expressive frenzy first revealed itself. Similar levels of intensity appeared in the finale of the second act, and the latter parts of the third, most notably in the moments following his revival from unconsciousness. But if these earlier scenes were notable for their hints of madness, Mr Burdenko's final appearances – from 'Pietà' to the brief death aria – were all the more compelling for their sober clarity.

Felicia Moore, as Lady Macbeth, possessed an impressively full tone and a rhythmic vitality in her phrasing that was, in each of her scenes, perfectly matched to the buoyant precision of the orchestra. Yet her performance in the early acts was more inwardly dramatic than outwardly projective and, despite an abundance of technical command, neither 'Vieni! t'affretta!' nor 'La luce langue' quite emerged as the show-stoppers they can be; nor could the rhythmic sparkle of the drinking song in the second act compete with Macbeth's deranged visions. But Ms Moore's approach yielded great results in the sleepwalking scene, drawing us stealthily into her nightmare, and ending on a note of captivating serenity.



Verdi: Macbeth. Enrique Mazzola, conductor. Marie-Ève Signeyrole, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, November 2024. © 2024 by Eike Walkenhorst.

Although the staging gave Macduff little chance to emerge as a character in the early acts, Attilio Glaser transformed 'Ah, la paterna mano' into one of the evening's highlights, a stirring expression of restrained passions overcome by an immense nobility of spirit. The choir were also on excellent form throughout the evening, nowhere more so than in the chorus of the Scottish refugees, but also in the charged drama of the first act finale. Enrique Mazzola presided over the orchestra with a customary mixture of energy and exactitude: if there were a handful of moments in which the meticulous pacing and scrupulous orchestra refinement didn't quite give the music enough room to breathe, at no point did the drama threaten to grow formless or slack. More often than not, Mr

Mazzola's approach proved a perfect match for Verdi's own preoccupation with dramatic momentum.

In the past five years Verdi has provided the foundation for some of the Deutsche Oper's most overtly political productions. To a list that includes the anti-colonial broadsides of *La forza del destino* (2019) and *Les vêpres siciliennes* (2022), and a *Simon Boccanegra* (2023) that dwelled on the tides of public opinion, the new *Macbeth* proved a worthy addition. Although the staging succeeded as both a character drama and a vehicle for strong musical performances, its insights into the rapidly evolving digital mechanisms that shape the modern political and corporate landscapes – technologies that, to the untrained eye, are indistinguishable from witchcraft – were by far its greatest source of fascination.



Verdi: Macbeth. Enrique Mazzola, conductor. Marie-Ève Signeyrole, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, November 2024. © 2024 by Eike Walkenhorst.